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DIVINE FAVORS THAT CALL FOR GRATITUDE, AND THE MANNER  
IN WHICH THEY SHOULD BE EXERCISED.

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A  
S E R M O N

DELIVERED BEFORE

THE FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH AND SOCIETY IN DRACUT

AT THE

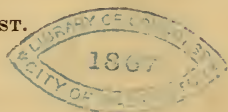
Annual Thanksgiving,

Nov. 30, 1826.

By JOSEPH MERRILL,

PASTOR OF THE FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH IN DRACUT, MASS.

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## SERMON.



ISAIAH LI. 3.

“JOY AND GLADNESS SHALL BE FOUND THEREIN, THANKSGIVING AND THE VOICE OF MELODY.”

THE passage in connexion with these words was spoken by the Messiah to encourage his people. He says, “Hearken unto me, ye that follow righteousness, ye that seek the Lord.” He then directs the attention of *these* to their commencement as a people. They are to look to Abraham their progenitor, who was, when God called him, an idolater. But God had blessed him and Sarah, and in a wonderful manner made their posterity innumerable. From this they might be assured that he would yet comfort Zion. She was to put on her mourning in the Babylonish captivity; and even after her return she would be called to pass through much darkness and distress. And when the Messiah should come he should be cut off, and the whole nation rejected. And after this she should be followed by persecutions, desolating and cruel, and plunged in the night of papal darkness, and almost overwhelmed in mystical Babylon. But notwithstanding all these things *the Lord would comfort Zion; he would comfort her waste places, and make her*

*wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the Lord. Joy and gladness should be found therein ; that is, in Zion, thanksgiving and the voice of melody.*

And did not God fulfil his promise in some measure to our ancestors who came to this then wide wilderness to enjoy the rights of conscience, who were uniformly pious, and who literally turned the wilderness into fruitful fields, and the desert into rich productive gardens. And when they had gathered of the bounty of heaven a supply for the ensuing year, *joy and gladness were found among them, thanksgiving and the voice of melody.*

*Joy and gladness* are not incompatible with the most devout and holy exercises of God's creatures. David says, "In his presence is fulness of joy :—" and Paul exhorts us to *rejoice always*. And we are taught by the prophet that when God shall comfort Zion and make her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the Lord, *joy and gladness shall be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of melody.* Here is a prediction, that God's people *will rejoice* and give thanks for the blessings he bestows upon them. Let us in the following discourse, first notice some of the principal divine favors which call for our gratitude ; and, secondly, how it should be exercised.

I. I am to notice some of the principal divine favours which call for our gratitude.

1. *The gift of his Son.* Paul considered this worthy of thanksgiving. Says he, "Thanks be to God for his unspeakable gift ;" a *gift* that could not in any sense be described. Without it we must all

have perished for ever. It was infinitely important and necessary for us. This procures for us all our enjoyments in this life, our state of probation, our hopes of escaping that death which was denounced upon man for transgression. This gift is sufficient to make atonement for our sins, and lay a foundation for pardon of all that repent and accept of Christ; to open a way to eternal life, so that the vilest sinners may escape from misery and obtain heaven. It is sufficient to remove from us the wrath of God, if we accept it, and restore us to his favor, and to his image, in which we were originally created.

This is the gift which saves lost sinners. Christ came into the world to seek and to save that which was lost. No mortal can conceive the greatness of this gift. Think of eternal burnings, of unutterable woe, to be continued without hope of deliverance for ever; to be banished from God, to be made most deformed and loathsome by sin; to be a monster of iniquity and ingratitude, and to dwell forever among those who are as loathsome as ourselves, and by them to be tormented day and night for ever; and think what it would be to be delivered from such a state and raised to the enjoyment of God, to participate the blessings of eternal life, to dwell in the presence of God and contemplate his beauty and glory, and his works of creation, providence, and redemption, and if you can conceive of these things, then may you have some apprehensions of the unspeakable gift of God in his Son.

And where could another such a gift be found. He is styled the only begotten of the Father; he has no compeer, he is *heir of all things*, he has obtain-

ed a better *name* and *inheritance* than the highest order of angels; he is God's *well beloved Son*, who dwelt in the *bosom of the Father*, whom the *Father loved*. He was dearer to the Father than all his creatures, as he is the only begotten, and heir of all things. But he so loved the world that he gave *this Son* to redeem us from iniquity.

And though this is the greatest gift in the power of heaven to bestow; though angels were commissioned to announce the blessing to men; yet, how many never had one spark of true gratitude to God for this unspeakable gift? This *should* call forth our warmest daily thanks, and this should *first* kindle a flame of gratitude upon our *holy days*, and whenever we approach the more immediate presence of God.

How miserable must we have been for ever if God had not provided for us a Savior! And as this gift is unspeakable, so it will be the theme of thanksgiving and praise in the church in every age, especially in its latter day glory, and in its triumphant state in heaven.

2. The enjoyment of the means of grace should excite our constant gratitude to God. It should be accounted the greatest blessing next to having a Savior, that we have the word of God in our hands, and are permitted to enjoy its ministry; and that we have the various means of becoming savingly acquainted with God. Those who are destitute of the gospel, and of the means of grace are emphatically said to be in darkness; while those who possess them are in the light.

The one may be compared to a traveller journeying in a strange country, in a trackless desert, overtaken by night, surrounded with clouds and darkness, and having nothing upon which he can depend to guide him in the way of safety. There may indeed be here and there a glimmering star, but he has no means of knowing in what part of the horizon they are, and he must wander not knowing whither he goes.

The other may be compared to one travelling in the light of day in a beaten path, with all the directions necessary to conduct him safe, through his journey.

To have the gospel in our hands, and the privilege of reading it and praying over it, is a treasure richer than all the golden mines on earth. What rich provisions does it yield for the support of the soul! It enriches the mind with divine knowledge; it prepares it to receive the light of life; it casts it in a nobler mould than *nature* can afford. It is the gospel and the means of grace that have been enjoyed in Christian lands that has raised them so much above the benighted pagan and savage. It is *not civilization* that stamps a godlike beauty and glory upon the mind of man. It may be cultivated and brought to all the perfection of which it is capable without the gospel, and still it lies degraded. It wants those features which shed a divine lustre upon it. Its movements are terrestrial and in a dark and circumscribed sphere, compared with the actings of a mind enriched with the light of the gospel, and imbued with its holy, and heavenly, and philanthropic spirit.

It is the gospel and the enjoyment of the means of grace that has broke the thick darkness that covered the earth, that has laid the foundation of those principles in man which now begin to develop; and which will, I trust, operate like leaven, till the whole earth shall awake, and march forward under their influence, and be filled with *joy and gladness, and thanksgiving and the voice of melody*. Too lightly do we value our religious privileges, as is manifest by our abuse of them.

It was to enjoy the gospel and the means of grace without molestation, that the Pilgrims left their native shore and crossed the boisterous ocean, and encountered all the evils of a barren wilderness, and of exposure to merciless savages. Their sacrifices, their conduct, shows how they valued the gospel and means of grace; and they esteemed it their highest privilege to transmit so rich an inheritance to us their sons. And not unfrequently on account of these same privileges were the woods made vocal by their songs and thanksgiving to God; and for them they were led to consecrate one day each year, as well as for other benefits, to religious joy and gladness, and thanksgiving, and raising the voice of melody. They laboured, they suffered, and fought, and bled, almost at every pore; and might almost be said to merit those blessings for which *they* gave thanks to God; but we receive them by inheritance, and yet are less grateful, and pious, and holy, it is to be feared, than they.

3. Another of the divine favors which should excite our gratitude is the pouring out of God's Holy Spirit. This is an indication that the time is

near when God will comfort Zion. He does by this comfort her waste places, and cause her wilderness to become as Eden, and her desert like the garden of the Lord. This blessing is based upon the gift of God's Son, and the enjoyment of the means of grace. And this blessing is unspeakably great. Where God's spirit is specially poured out, precious immortal souls are regenerated, translated from darkness to God's marvellous light, from the power and kingdom of satan into the kingdom of God's dear Son. All the other blessings will never save a soul from hell without the special grace of God.

How then should we rejoice when God appears in this manner to comfort and build up Zion and save precious souls. Even the angels in heaven rejoice over one sinner that repents. It is this outpouring of God's spirit that causes the spiritually blind to see, the deaf to hear, and the lame to walk ; it is this which opens a new world upon dark perishing mortals, who believe and share in the rich grace of God. It is this which plucks sinners from the jaws of hell and ruin, brings them from the path of sin, and sets them in the path of life ; which enables them to see their ruined state, and fills them with joy and gladness at their escape from the gulf which lay before them. It is the outpouring of God's spirit that brings Christ upon earth again, and sheds the pure spirit of his gospel, and life upon all who repent and believe. This is the shower which causes the word of life to fructify and spread through the soul, and which produces a truly golden harvest. the fruit of eternal life.

Wherever the spirit of God is poured out there is joy and gladness. There may be *weeping for the night*, but *joy cometh in the morning*. Thus it was on the day of Pentecost. They did eat their meat with gladness, praising God. And when the Spirit was poured out upon Samaria upon the preaching of Philip, it is written, "There was great joy in that city." And this always has produced joy and gladness in the hearts of God's people, from that day to the present.

There is nothing like the out-pouring of God's spirit to arrest the progress of iniquity, to frustrate the plans of the great enemy of souls, or to excite the rage and malice of wicked men. And what can so rejoice and gladden the hearts of God's people, as to have iniquity destroyed, and the enemy of souls defeated, and wicked men brought *to feel* upon the subject of religion.

No doubt the words of the text allude to the out-pouring of God's spirit, and the complete establishment of the kingdom of Christ upon the earth. And we have peculiar cause of gratitude in this Commonwealth that God has in many places the past year, as well as in former years, granted these showers of blessings to descend upon them, and fill them with *gladness and joy, thanksgiving and the voice of melody*. And his mercy-drops are even now distilling "like the small dew upon the tender herb," upon some favoured places; which calls for our gratitude and praise. And may we not hope that some amongst us have experienced the joys of pardoned sin, and are prepared to praise God with different affections from what they have usually exercised up-

on this anniversary ? If one soul has repented, there has been joy in the presence of God, and gives occasion for thanksgiving and praise to him.

4. Our civil privileges, and our prosperity as a community call for our peculiar gratitude. No people can be more perfectly in the enjoyment of liberty than the citizens of this commonwealth. We may justly boast of our liberty in dependence upon God. Tyranny or slavery in any form cannot here exist. It is not presumed that our government is perfect, that there are not many imperfections in the administration of justice, for there will be imperfections in all human governments. But as the supreme power is in an important sense lodged in the hands of the people, and the executive officers are frequently elected by the great body of the people, and the laws are subject to revision and repeal, we must be in the perfect enjoyment of civil liberty. So far as we are an independent State, this is true ; but how much of the stigma of the slave holding states can properly be attached to us on account of the compact with the general government, I shall not take it upon me to decide. But whether we are stained by our sister states' coloured population or not, we should be forward to wipe out the blot upon our country produced by the inhuman practice of buying and selling and holding in bondage our fellow man, because he is found " guilty of a skin not coloured like our own."

Our civil institutions protect our religious liberty, and extend to the education of the rising generation, to the encouragement and care in some respects of our literary institutions. *They* are open to

all of every denomination, and every sect enjoys an equal privilege, if we except Harvard University, which I consider now under Unitarian domination.—Under these institutions the people increase in wealth and population. Commerce, agriculture, manufactures flourish, and promise to pour into the State such a tide of wealth, as to enable her citizens to do much in promoting institutions of charity, and disseminating the word of life among the nations sitting in darkness, as well as in making internal improvements, and rendering society within herself more happy.

5. Our health and the common bounties of God's providence demand the gratitude of our hearts. Health is a blessing without which all other blessings of a temporal nature are little enjoyed. Though sickness has prevailed in some individual places, yet the people of this State have generally enjoyed the past year a good measure of health. And though sickness has visited many of our habitations, we are called to acknowledge with gratitude the goodness of God in raising so many of us from the borders of the grave to so much health as we now enjoy ; and that so few of those who have been sick have been called to meet their final Judge. How thankful should we be that *we* are now in health, and enjoy so many of the bounties of God's providence.

We have reason to bless him that he did not send drought to cut off our former and latter harvest, that he did not send such an abundance of rain as wholly to destroy what had come to maturity ; and that we may now appear before him in the prospect

of having food and raiment, and something to send in portions to the poor. All the comforts and conveniencies of life are the gift of God, and demand our constant and lively gratitude, and our particular remembrance on this occasion.

These, my hearers, are some of the principal things that call for our gratitude to God upon this joyful and solemn day. I now proceed to notice—

## II. How it should be exercised.

1. By our charity and liberality. If God remembers us, and visits us with such rich blessings, with health, and the bounty of his Providence, we ought to remember our fellow creatures. If God *has so loved us, as to give his Son, we ought to love one another.* Let us not therefore *love in word, neither in tongue, but in deed and in truth.* If we receive at the hand of God those things which are necessary for our comfort and convenience in abundance, we ought not to grasp them as though they were obtained by our own wisdom and strength.

We should seek to obtain the blessing of God by remembering the poor, and bestowing such things as we have upon the needy. God has said, “Blessed is he that considereth the poor, the Lord will deliver him in time of trouble.” And our liberality may not only evince the genuineness of our gratitude, but cause others to abound in thanksgiving to God. Says Paul, “God loveth a cheerful giver, and God is able to make all grace abound towards you, that ye always having all sufficiency in all things may abound unto every good work, being enriched in every thing to all bountifulness, which causeth through us thanksgiving to God.” For the

administration of this service not only supplieth the wants of the saints, but is abundant also by many thanksgivings unto God. We cannot be suitably thankful to God while we hold his bounty with the hand of coveteousness.

2. We are to express our gratitude by spiritual worship. The time has come when God requires those that worship him, to worship him in spirit and truth. And no formal, external worship will be accepted instead of it. All those expressions of joy and gratitude, which flow from animal spirits, from the natural man, come infinitely short of true gratitude to God. He commands us *to worship him in spirit*; but we are by nature *dead in trespasses and sins*. We must therefore repent before we can render to God the gratitude he requires. There is joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth. And there is joy and gladness and thanksgiving and the voice of melody, in the sense of the text, only, where there is genuine repentance for sin.

And hence we see men improve these seasons of thanksgiving to gratify their lusts. They remain in impenitence, and imagine that he requires only those external expressions, such as the heathen would render to an idol. But has God any pleasure in these things? He requires *praise* that we should *glorify him*; *truth in the inward parts*, or we stand condemned before him. How can we praise God for the gift of his Son, if we refuse to have him for our Savior? And how can we praise him for the gospel, and means of grace, if we slight them, and disobey God's command? And how shall we bring a thank-offering to God for any benefit, if

we come not through Christ? No man can come to the Father but by him. The soul must enter into these things with life, with love, and gratitude to God, or all our service will be only abomination to the Lord. We should feel our dependence upon mercy and grace, we should accept of Christ as he is offered us in the gospel, and submit to his reign, if we would render to him true gratitude. We should express our joy in praising God with all the heart, resolving to obey all his will, and to trust in him for salvation. We should sing his praises in songs of *melody*, singing *with the spirit and the understanding also*. We should approach him with those holy affections in our songs and praises, which fill the hearts of those worshippers, who stand bending before his throne, day without night, and render honor and praise and thanksgiving, to him that sitteth upon the throne and unto the Lamb.

And if such is the manner in which our gratitude ought to be expressed, what are we to think of *their* service who spend these sacred and solemn days, made *sacred* by the usage of our pious ancestors, in worldly pleasure and amusement, and intemperance, and the indulgence of every unhallowed passion? What, indeed, shall we say of those who pay a decent respect externally to the day, but whose hearts are barred against the Savior, who lightly value his word, who ridicule and deprecate the out-pouring of God's spirit, as though there were no such thing, as the special operation of the Spirit upon the heart of man? And what shall be said of the gratitude of those who hoard and consume upon their lusts all that a gracious and merciful Providence may bestow

upon them, without opening the hand of charity, or making one effort to send the cheering light of the Gospel to those who sit in gross darkness? We are made stewards of God's bounty while here, and to whom much is given, much will of them be required. And, "It is required of stewards that a man be found faithful."

Though we have much to excite our gratitude as a people in this place, ought we not to consider that Providence frowns upon us for our abuse of his mercies, by sending upon us the abundant and grievous afflictions we have experienced in past years? And while we remember his mercies in gratitude, should we not lament for our sins? And may we not expect that he will continue to visit us with judgments, unless, as a people, we repent of our sins and turn to him with all the heart?

These seasons of praising God in his earthly temple will soon be over. And then we shall find that our principal cause of gratitude to God was our spiritual blessings and privileges; then shall we view with wonder the unspeakable gift of God's Son, the blessings of the Gospel, and the special influences of the Holy Spirit.

Temporal blessings may only be snares to our souls, which may procure their ruin. They may cherish our pride, lead to ungodliness, and intemperance, and innumerable evils; when, if poverty had been our lot, we might have been rich in faith, and among those in Zion that shall be comforted. Let us then set a just value upon every blessing we receive at the hand of God; let us repent of all our sins, and endeavor to be prepared to give an account

of our stewardship. Let us seek to God above all for his Holy Spirit that we may be renewed by his grace, and prepared to praise him in a spiritual manner.

In vain do we enjoy the blessings of the gospel, civil liberty, health, and the bounties of Providence, and all the light of the glorious gospel, unless it shine into our hearts, unless our souls be enlightened, and we obey as well as enjoy the word of life. Never will the Lord comfort any as he comforts Zion, till they obey his word; and then shall their *wilderness be like Eden*, and their *desert like the garden of the Lord*; *joy and gladness shall be in them; thanksgiving and the voice of melody.* Amen.





















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